

DUXBURY BEACH

Duxbury Clipper, Thursday, July 29, 1982

The Clipper Visits Duxbury Beach

By PAT BARLOW

In accordance with Murphy's Law of coincidence and the perversities of Mother Nature, my beach visit was conducted one Saturday morning just as the heat was building to a hellish level of discomfort. Hordes of Duxbury residents, being of sound mind, were also aimed at "Big Beach," though not to interview conservation officers. With the outgoing tide leaving neighborhood coves and little beaches in bare-bottom muck, they were after a refreshing dip where there is always enough water.

Cars crossed Powder Point Bridge in bumper-to-bumper procession from morning to afternoon, rolling up windows to show beach stickers, unloading cargo, and reconnoitering parking spots. Unlike previous years, no one had to be turned away for lack of parking, owing to expanded accommodations on the inside bay and the north end of the lot.

According to the 3 conservation officers on duty, their activities were typical of a weekend scorcher: directing traffic, answering questions, re-routing vehicles without permits, passing out printed directions to the public beach (the time-saving brainchild of conservation foreman, Joe Grady), cautioning bikers and mopeders to lock their wheels and, with "bionic eyes," tracking litterbugs and those about to trample the precious preserve of beach grass.

Not typical, however, was the sudden whooping of the fire chief's car before noon, or the wail of other sirens approaching beach getaways. Alerted more by intelligence and training than information transmitted by radio, conservation officers Gwen Evans, Gordon Cushing and Larry Whalen unclogged bridge traffic, cleared beach access roads at both ends of the parking lot, ushered pedestrians and the curious out of the way, and dashed from checkpoint to checkpoint, relaying and confirming instructions with other town personnel. They had everything under control within minutes, a heartbeat ahead of the first forestry fire trucks roaring in from Marshfield, Duxbury, Plymouth and Kingston.

"Fire on Gurnet," somebody shouted from the back of a firetruck, and that was as detailed as the information got for the next hour. Given the excitement and non-stop arrival of beachers with boats, floats, friends, relatives, children and dogs, it was no time to be doing an Edward R. Murrow on the conservation officers. On the other hand, it was a splendid opportunity to observe them in action under the most trying circumstances.

Radio channels on beach and town vehicles were too busy clearing the way for emergency equipment to elaborate on the nature and location of the fire. From the beach, a trail of smoke could barely be distinguished on the hazy horizon, but one sharp-eyed police officer correctly guessed the source as the vicinity of the old Coast Guard station at Gurnet.

In such a situation one would expect a certain amount of bedlam, crossed signals, short-temperedness and spontaneous stupidity. All the elements were there including a disabled vehicle at a major artery, dozens of wide-eyed youngsters (and wild-eyed parents trying to find them), and a bridge and parking lot packed with cars and trailers trying to get out of the way of fire trucks, with no place to do it. Yet, the 3 conservation officers on duty, college students with no more than one season's experience behind them, remained efficient, congenial and utterly professional. They gave no indication of the pressure they were under, and even managed heroic courtesy to several newspaper reporters asking questions about an unrelated event.

If only one word could be used to describe the conduct of the conservation officers, I concluded it would be "competent."

The fire, described in an earlier edition of the Clipper, began in a generator shed at the old Coast Guard station, ignited 2 propane tanks which exploded, and the resultant blaze was intense enough to threaten

neighboring buildings. Had the conservation officers not responded with such remarkable presence of mind, the firetrucks would have been seriously delayed.

If you ask these young men and women what the job is all about, they'll tell you it's 90% people management; helping people solve their beach problems as pleasantly as possible. They make it sound easy. In fact, their responsibilities have a limitless range, often exceeding job description, and requiring them to rely heavily on ingenuity and uncommon common sense.

In the public relations area, they are forever explaining to beachers without permits that the reservation is not a public park. It is privately owned by Duxbury Beach Reservations, Inc., who leases it to the town for \$12,000 a year. The town sells beach permits to residents (and dune-vehicle permits to non-residents) to finance the area's safety and maintenance programs, conservation of its fragile ecology, and bridge repairs. Though there is no comprehensive manual for the various agencies that share supervision of the beach, services are smoothly integrated to provide maximum protection of its resources and those who use them.

Most visible in this effort are the conservation officers whose official duties range from checking beach permits, planting vegetation, rendering first aid (they are all CPR certified), traffic control, lost and found, relaying distress calls to harbor masters, beach patrol, preventing mischief, monthly beach clean-ups...to keeping their due-for-retirement Ram-Charger operating against heavy odds.

Their days are not all fresh air and sunshine, nor are they wearing uniforms and badges to impress tourists. They are sworn-in as special police officers and are empowered to detain law-breakers.

Who are these officials whose cheerful dispositions lend serenity to an otherwise hectic trek to the beach? In addition to those I observed on duty, they are foreman Joe Grady, whose perpetual grin and sandy-haired youth come as a surprise, considering his role as senior staffer in charge of training. John Aldrich, available for special beach details, is another senior, having worked as a conservation officer intermittently since 1974. Others are Paul Romano and Joe Marchisio, both school teachers come September, and Jayne Van Eykeren and Mark Lindquist.

For all there have been moments of confrontation with belligerent beachers and though not frequent, these moments occur mostly at night when there is least back-up in case of emergency. Adding to the danger-potential is lack of direct communication with the police department. The radio system available to the conservation patrol has been adequate to date, but emergency-assist calls depend on relay through the fire department.

On one recent patrol, 2 conservation officers were challenged to a brawl by 5 drunk and disorderly men clenching bottles. The troublemakers were reasoned into leaving the beach at the insistence of the officers, but at calculated risk.

Another recent test of wits took place at High Pines when a 260-pound youth broke his leg and 2 of 3 officers on duty had to leave the bridge gate to assume first-on-site management of the accident. While they were dealing with the onerous task of stabilizing the victim for medical evacuation, they knew their colleague at the bridge was vulnerable should something go wrong there. Such knowledge does not rest easy on the mind.

Not that conservation officers are complaining. They aren't. Whatever substantial stuff they are made of, its warp and woof are a keen understanding of human nature and a sturdy sense of the appropriate.

For instance, the beach should be just about litter-free the last part of July because a large group of juvenile vandals, breaking bottles and strewing trash, were nabbed in the act by conservation officers, and given a choice: notification of parents with possible loss of beach permits, or 8 hours each of clean-up detail. The vandals opted for the latter. The conservation officers made it the sensible choice to everyone's benefit.

The "volunteer" labor force is similarly swelled by

youngsters caught diving off Powder Point Bridge after repeated warnings that the adventure is illegal and dangerous. At low tide divers have maybe 7 feet of water waiting for them in the channel with 9 more at high tide. But who-knows-what the last storm or tide may have deposited at the diving site, waiting to shatter a bone or 2? The divers are a constant cause of concern to conservation officers, but the problem is only one of many pressing matters to be monitored.

I gleaned most of the aforesaid from officers on-the-hoof the day of the Gurnet fire, and by piecing together information offered by police and fire officials, and civilians impressed by the quality of management at Duxbury Beach. Let it not be said I wrote this account with kind prejudice or ignorance of the realities that irritate us all, sooner or later, when it comes to Big Beach. All in all, it is a soundly-controlled environment with few restrictions and countless virtues to be enjoyed.

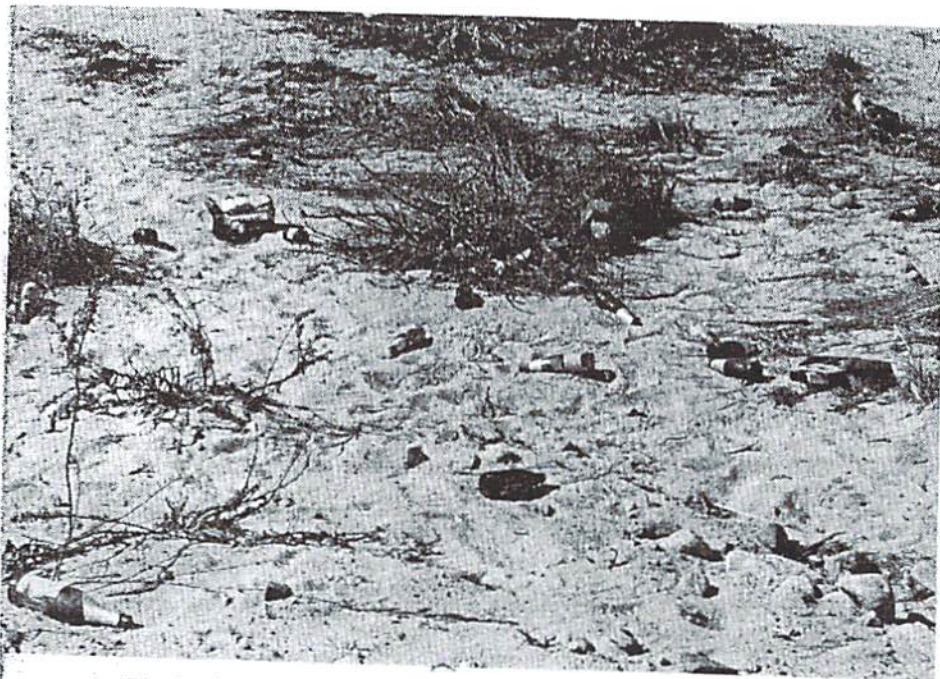
As for the fire on Gurnet, it was not without an anti-climax for the conservation officers. When the convoy of 7 firetrucks radioed it was ready to leave the Coast Guard station, one of them announced it was out of gas and a parked car blocked the exit road around the sand trap before the bridge. Once again, Whalen, Evans and Cushing had to sprint from one end of the beach to the other -- during peak heat and traffic -- trying to find the owner of the car. At the same time, the Jeep that had died in front of the fire trucks as they arrived was still an obstacle at their departure, though its owners had been working on it for several hours.

To the glee of gathered children, it was quite some time of shared speculation before anyone knew the fire was not a major disaster. Of such days at Big Beach are memorable childhood summers made. One wonders if they don't also age our conservation officers before their time.



Underpinning to Duxbury's long wooden bridge looking from the beach to the mainland along the seaward side.

Photos by Lindy Blaisdell



The broken glass and beer bottles that litter Duxbury Beach



Sign warning travelers of soft sand in the connection road between Duxbury's private and public beaches.